Acta Orientalia Hung.
DOI: 10.1556/062.2023.00373

AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

Spots and Stripes:
An Investigation into the Representations of the Hyena in Ancient India

Péter Száler*

Department of Indian Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

Received: June 24, 2023 • Accepted: December 22, 2023

© 2023 The Author

ABSTRACT

In this article I intended to further explore Jürgen Frembgen's supposition about the late presence of the spotted hyena in South Asia with the help of available textual sources. My aim was to determine what kind of animal is meant by the word *tarakṣu*, which is the common Sanskrit name for the hyena.

KEYWORDS

spotted hyena, striped hyena, cheetah, tiger, sloth bear, Sanskrit literature, ancient India, Mṛgapakṣiśāstra

INTRODUCTION

The hyena belongs to those few animals that have caught the attention of people since the beginning of history. Although there exist four species within the family Hyaenidae, namely the aardwolf (*Proteles cristata*), the brown hyena (*Parahyaena brunnea*), the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) and the striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*), only the latter two, observed by ancient travellers and historians (Funk 2012: 146), may have been responsible for shaping the common cultural image of the hyena.

On the one hand, this image is quite infamous in the so-called Western civilisation, where, among others, Aristotle (*The History of Animals*. 8.7.2. p. 204–205), Milton (*Samson Agonistes* 748. p. 25), Hemingway (*Green Hills of Africa*. p. 43–44), The Lion King and most recently Life

* Corresponding author. E-mail: szaler.peter@btk.elte.hu

AKJournals

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

of Pi might be at the bottom of the fact that the hyena has been ordinarily conceived as a despised creature associated with grave robbing and hermaphroditism (Glickman 1995: 508). These characteristics together attest to the notion that the cultural image of the hyena is apparently influenced by both of the two above-mentioned species of the Hyaenidae, because scavenging is typical mainly of the striped hyena, while an androgynous appearance is characteristic exclusively of the spotted hyena (Heptner and Sludskii 1992: 8–10).

The general image of the hyena, on the other hand, is not as much decided in Africa and Asia, where, apart from the disadvantageous hallmarks, there are many positive beliefs and customs connected to them (Frembgen 1998: 332–335, 338–341). It is, furthermore, quite notable that a great number of these thoughts are associated with fertility, and thus the hyena is often celebrated as a symbol of fruitfulness (Frembgen 1998: 338–341). Jürgen W. Frembgen (1998: 334) proposed that it is the peculiar anatomy of the female spotted hyena that may be the source of this association: it has penis-like clitoris together with a pseudo-scrotum, which, in Frembgen's (1998: 340) opinion, is able to transform the hyena into an animal that has magical powers that aid in love and fruitfulness.

The weakness of this argumentation, as Frembgen also pointed out, is that the fertility rites focusing on the hyena also flourish in South Asia, where spotted hyena does not exist in nature. For this paradox Frembgen (1998: 341) put forward two possible explanations:

> 'Beliefs on the spotted hyena could have been orally transmitted by traders, dervishes, migrants, etc., and subsequently transferred to the local striped hyena. A second hypothesis would be an assumed earlier existence of the spotted hyena in parts of western and southern Asia analogous distribution, for example, of the lion, leopard, and cheetah in Iran until the early twentieth century. It is not improbable that traditional beliefs on nowadays extinct spotted hyenas in this region could have been transferred to the related species of the striped hyena.'

Because the *Kāmasūtra* (7.1.10), a pre-Islamic work, associates the hyena with love magic and claims that an eye or bone of a hyena[1] worn on the right hand can make one charming, Frembgen's second hypothesis strongly urged me to investigate if there are any textual references to the existence of the spotted hyena on the Indian Peninsula. This resulted in the present article in which I intend to find out how the Sanskrit sources depict the hyena. To begin with, I examine the usage of the Sanskrit word *tarakṣu*, which the widely used dictionaries (Apte 1890: 532, Böhtlingk and Roth 1861: 265, Monier-Williams 2012: 439) designate as the common term for the hyena. At the outset, I exhibit passages that may refer to the striped hyena, the only extant species of the Hyaenidae on the Indian Subcontinent. Then I include passages that express characteristics atypical for scavengers. In connection with these latter mentions, at first, I look into whether they can refer to the spotted hyena with regard to Frembgen's hypothesis. Finally, in closing, I briefly revisit the former arguments and reveal some other predators that have also been referred to *tarakṣu* but definitely do not belong to the Hyaenidae family.

[1] As a matter fact, though the widely used edition of the *Kāmasūtra* refers to the eye of a hyena (*akṣi tarakṣor*), it is difficult to imagine how one can wear an eye on their hand. On the contrary, Burton and Arbuthnot's English translation of this work (p. 211) alludes to the bone of a hyena, which indicates that there may be an *asthi* (bone) variant for the word *akṣi* here. A similar custom is, incidentally, recognised in Iran, where some people think that a kind of stone found in the body of a hyena could provide protection if one wears it on their upper arm (Frembgen 1998: 339).

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

STRIPES

Although the striped hyena is a well-known scavenger in South Asia, neither stone sculptures nor written sources deal much with it. On the one hand, the hyena is among the few animals that may not have been sculpted at all (van der Geer 2008: 427). On the other hand, though the Sanskrit works are not completely devoid of references to hyenas, most of the texts share only vague information about the animal. The word *tarakṣu* is usually encapsulated into long as well as schematic lists and *dvaṃdva*-compounds enumerating various species (*Mahābhārata* 1.36.10, 1.219.1–2, *Rāmāyaṇa* 2.88.7, 3.44.28).

Perhaps this negligence can be explained by the hyena's hateful scavenging behaviour (van der Geer 2008: 427), to which there are references dating back to the *Mahābhārata*. The great epic details how hyenas, jackals, crows and other scavengers feasted on corpses after the fall of Abhimanyu:

> *atīva hṛṣṭāḥ śvasṛgālavāyasā baḍāḥ. suparṇāś ca vṛkās tarakṣavaḥ|*
> *vayāṃsy asṛkpāny* (sic!) *atha rakṣasāṃ gaṇāḥ piśācasaṃghāś ca sudāruṇā raṇe||*
> *tvaco vinirbhidya piban vasām asṛk tathaiva majjāṃ piśitāni cāśnuvan|*
> *vapāṃ vilumpanti hasanti gānti ca prakarṣamāṇāḥ kuṇapāny anekaśaḥ||*
> (*Mahābhārata* 7.48.47–48)
>
> The dogs, the jackals, the crows, the vultures, the wolves, the hyenas, the birds, the vampires,[2] the rākṣasas and the piśācas rejoiced at the dreadful battle. They cleaved the skin [of the fallen soldiers] to drink blood with lymph and ate marrow as well as meat. They tore the intestines to pieces, laughed and sang, while they yanked the corpses many times.[3]

Another gruesome picture of the Kurukṣetra War illustrates a river of blood, on the bank of which hyenas and vultures gorged:

> *tataḥ śaraughair niśitaiḥ Kirīṭinā nṛdehaśastrakṣatalohitodā|*
> *nadī sughorā naradehaphenā pravartitā tatra raṇājire vai||*
> *vegena sātīva pṛthupravāhā prasusrutā bhairavārāvarūpā|*
> *paretanāgāśvaśarīrarodhā narāntramajjābhṛtamāṃsapaṅkā||*
> *prabhūtarakṣogaṇabhūtasevitā śiraḥkapālākulakeśaśādvalā|*
> *śarīrasaṃghātasahasravāhinī viśīrṇanānākavacormisaṃkulā||*
> *narāśvanāgāsthinikṛttaśarkarā vināśapātālavatī bhayāvahā|*
> *tāṃ kaṅkamālāvṛtagṛdhrakahvaiḥ kravyādasaṃghaiś ca tarakṣubhiś ca||*
> *upetakūlāṃ dadṛśuḥ samantāt krūrāṃ mahāvaitaraṇī-prakāśām|*
> *pravartitām Arjunabāṇasaṃghair medovasāsṛkpravahāṃ subhīmām||*
> *te cedipāñcālakarūṣamatsyāḥ pārthāś*[4] *ca sarve sahitāḥ praṇeduḥ|*
> (*Mahābhārata* 6.55.121–126.b)

[2] The word *asṛkpa* literally means blood-drinker.
[3] All translations in this paper are mine (P. Sz.).
[4] In the *Mahābhārata,* although the word *pārtha* as a metonym refers to Pṛthā's sons, I have taken its secondary meaning here because of the context (Apte 1890: 697).

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

> After that, Arjuna's sharp arrows gave rise to a terrible river on the battlefield. Its water was the blood of the wounds on the human bodies caused by weapons. Its foam was corpses. It ran quickly and widely. It had a horrible sound and form. Its banks were made up of the bodies of fallen elephants and horses. It was muddied by human flesh and marrow. Its way was followed by many *rākṣasas* and *bhūtas*. It seemed grassy because of there being hairy skulls. It washed away many thousands of cadavers. It was wavy by reason of the various pieces of armour scattered [in the field]. The bones of the men, the horses and the elephants made it gritty. Its destruction was reminiscent of that of the Pātāla. It caused tremors. The princes of the Cedis, the Pāñcālas, the Karūṣas and the Matsyas – who saw that very horrible, blood-shedding river, which resembled great Vaitaraṇī, and the shores of which were everywhere crowded by herons, vultures, cranes, scavengers and hyenas, and which was originated from Arjuna's arrows, and which brought fat, marrow and blood – cried without exception.

Apart from scavenging, a nocturnal mode of life arises as the other main characteristic of the *tarakṣu* in the *Mahābhārata*:

> *gomāyusaṃghāś ca vadanti rātrau rakṣāṃsy atho niṣpatanty antarikṣāt|*
> *mṛgāḥ śṛgālāḥ śitikaṇṭhāś ca kākā gṛdhrā baḍāś caiva tarakṣavaś ca||*
> (*Mahābhārata* 5.47.98)

> When the night comes, the *rākṣasas* fly out of the sky, while the jackals, the gazelles, the peacocks, the crows, the vultures, the *baḍas*[5] and the hyenas start to make noise.

These epic quotations apparently affirm the common thought that the *tarakṣu* may have been identical to the Indian striped hyena. Scavenging and nocturnality (Heptner and Sludskii 1992: 36) are hallmarks that distinguish it from prodigious predators, such as the lion, the leopard and the tiger. This, incidentally, corresponds to the grouping of the creatures found in the *Parāśarasmṛti* (7th–8th century, Olivelle 2010: 48), the sixth chapter of which touches on the killing of various beings while also sorting animals into fourteen groups (*Parāśarasmṛti* 6.2–6.15). According to grouping, hyenas, wolf-like animals and termite-hunting sloth bears together constitute one category:

> *vṛkajambūkaṛkṣāṇāṃ tarakṣuśvānaghātakaḥ|*
> *tilaprasthaṃ dvije dadyād vāyubhakṣo dinatrayam||*
> (*Parāśarasmṛti* 6.11)

> Someone who kills a wolf, a jackal, a bear, a hyena or a dog should give one *prastha*[6] sesame to a *brāhmaṇa* and live on air for three days.

[5] The word *baḍa* might be identical to *vaṭa*, referring to a kind of bird (Monier-Williams 2012: 914).
[6] A particular unit of mass (Monier-Williams 2012: 699).

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

SPOTS

In spite of the fact that the *Mahābhārata* usually depicts the hyena as a nocturnal scavenger and the *Parāśarasmṛti* draws a clear boundary between it and big cats, there are still some textual traces that seem to uncover a certain relationship between the *tarakṣu* and other predators. First of all, the *Mahābhārata* contains a simile that compares the combat between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas to the hereditary enmity of the predators with the herbivores:

> *tad yuddham abhavad ghoram īkṣitṛprītivardhanam|*
> *siṃhavyāghrataraksūṇāṃ yathebhamahiṣarṣabhaiḥ||* (*Mahābhārata* 7.24.44)
>
> That frightful battle grew the pleasure of the eyes as much as the war of the lions, the tigers and the hyenas with the elephants, the buffaloes and the bulls.

The verse gives the impression that the *tarakṣu* is among the three most reputable predators, which can hardly refer to the scavenging striped hyena, even though it occasionally also hunts small prey (Leslie 2016: 127). This image of the predatory *tarakṣu* is, furthermore, not unique: there are similar allusions in some Indian philosophical texts.

To illustrate the weakness of inferences that lack the right perception, Jayatīrtha's *Nyāyasudhā* (14th century, Mahārāṣṭra, Sharma 1981: 246), a sub-commentary on Madhva's *Anuvyākhyāna*, quotes a proverb, according to which a fawn is never able to be a capable foe for a *tarakṣu* (*na hi bhavati tarakṣoḥ pratipakṣo hariṇaśāvaḥ*, Jayatīrtha comm. ad *Anuvyākhyāna* 2.1.80.ab, 3.2.17. cd). This analogy is also found in Vācaspatimiśra's commentary on the *Nyāyasūtra* (10th–11th century, Bihār, Acharya 2006: xviii, xxx), which cites the adage in a bit more extended form:

> *na hi bhavati tarakṣuḥ pratipakṣo hariṇaśāvakasya kiṃ tu samarakaṇḍūnighnaviṣāṇakoṭi-samullikhitagaṇḍaśailasya vipinamāhiṣasya|* (Vācaspatimiśra comm. ad *Nyāyasūtra* p. 33)
>
> For a hyena, a fawn cannot be a [capable] enemy, unlike the forest buffalo, the cheeks of which are scratched by the ends of the horns devoted to itching in battles.

According to the passage, a *tarakṣu*, just like a lion or a tiger, is a possible source of danger for robust ungulates, such as the buffalo. Its position among the top predators is asserted further by the Buddhist *Suvarṇaprabhāsasūtra* (3th–4th century, Gummer 2015: 249), which similarly mentions the *tarakṣu* together with tigers, bears and lions:

> *māṃsoṣṇāni rudhirāṇi rasasaṃkāśaṃ bhaved yad iha|*
> *etad bhojanam uktaṃ vyāghratarakṣvṛkṣasiṃhānām||* (*Suvarṇaprabhāsasūtra* 19.3)
>
> The meat and the warm blood, which look like essential juices of the body here, are accounted as the food of tigers, hyenas, bears and lions.

The hot blood would be scarcely consumed by those animals, which live off discarded carcasses. In this way, the references to the predatory conduct of the *tarakṣu* lead us back to Frembgen's (1998: 341) proposition about the presence of the spotted hyena in South Asia. As the spotted

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

hyena, unlike its striped relative, is an infamous predator in Africa (Glickman 1995: 502), the above-cited sources can give some strength to the idea that these animals inhabited the Indian Peninsula during the historical periods in which the sources were written. Although of course this question belongs mainly to the scope of archaeozoology, there are two additional textual sources that suggest that the word *tarakṣu* could refer to both striped and spotted hyenas.

The first possible argument for the existence of the spotted hyena is found in the Vedic literature. The *saṃhitās* of the *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda*[7] (1200–800 BC, Witzel 2001: 5) as well as the *brāhmaṇas* of the *Sāmaveda*[8] (900–500 BC, Basham 1986: xvii) speak about a mysterious beast called *sālāvṛka* or *sālāvṛkeya*. Although there is no consensus about its identification, Stephanie W. Jamison (1991: 68–76) theorized that the word *sālāvṛka* meant hyena. Jamison (1991: 68–69) regarded it as worthless to increase the number of attempts to etymologise the name of these wolf-like animals (cf. *vṛka*) and instead was keen on detecting their attainable hallmarks in the textual sources. Thus, she (1991: 70–71) recognised allusions, such as the hyena's massive head and its laugh-like sound.

Jamison (1991: 69–70) was, in fact, aware of the weakness of her own theory and confessed her hope that spotted and striped hyenas looked alike, because she based her supposition mostly on reports about the spotted hyena due to the lack of studies on the striped hyena. In this way, Jamison referred in vain to the famous laugh of the hyena, since striped hyenas are unable to produce this sound (Frembgen 1998: 332), unlike spotted hyenas, which are widely known as the laughing hyena (Funk 2012: 155).

Although Jamison's efforts may seem on the surface to be unavailing, her remarks can be reused here as possible arguments for the supposed presence of the spotted hyena on the Indian Peninsula. If the word *sālāvṛka* in fact refers to a member of the family Hyaenidae, as Jamison proposed, it seems more probable that these early sources touch on the spotted hyena rather than the striped one.

Incidentally, reference to the famous laugh of the hyena may also appear in Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita* (7th century, Uttar Pradeś, Basham 1986: xviii). Its eighth chapter shares a description of an idyllic forest, where, among others, joyful hyenas (*Harṣacarita* 8. p. 235: *pramuditatarataraksavaḥ*) appear. There is not any reason, such as the presence of a corpse or prey, mentioned for the cheerfulness of the *tarakṣu*. Thus, it is suggested that the apparent joy serves as an epithet of the hyena, in the background of which, perhaps, their laugh-like sound can be recognised.

Apart from the Vedic references to the *sālāvṛka*, the other argument for the existence of the spotted hyena is included in the *Mṛgapakṣiśāstra* (13th century), a proto-zoological handbook attributed to Haṃsadeva, a Jain monk from Gujarāt (Sadhale and Nene 2008: xi). This encyclopaedical work on the Indian fauna comprises a quite detailed description about the *tarakṣu* right after descriptions of various types of lions and tigers:

> *hīnajātisamudbhūtā api caite tarakṣavaḥ|*
> *prāyaśaḥ śārdūlatulyaparākramabalodayaḥ||*
> *tarakṣavaś ca vyāghrāś ca saṭāhīnā viniścitāḥ|*
> *kāmotpattiś ca teṣāṃ tu vyāghrāṇām iva niścitā||*

[7] *Kapiṣṭhala-saṃhitā* 7.1. p. 71, 39.4. p. 215, *Kāṭhaka–saṃhitā* 8.5. p. 88, 11.10. p. 157, 25.6. p. 109, 36.7. p. 74, *Maitrāyaṇī-saṃhitā* 1.10.12. p. 89, 3.9.3. p. 282, *Taittirīya-saṃhitā* 6.2.7.5. p. 263.
[8] *Jaiminīya-brāhmaṇa* 1.185. p. 182, *Pañcaviṃśa-brāhmaṇa* 8.1.4, 13.4.17, 14.11.29, 18.1.9, 19.4.7.

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

dṛḍhā mūḍhasvabhāvāś ca nitarāṃ krodhaśālinaḥ|
tarakṣavas tu jāyante kṛṣṇaraktaśarīrakāḥ||
kiṃcidaunnatyahīnāś ca rekhāvalivivarjitāḥ|
kṛṣṇabinduyutāḥ kecit śaravegapadāṃkitāḥ||
āyataiḥ karkaśai romasaṃghaiḥ saṃveṣṭitāṃgakāḥ|
hrasvapādā hrasvanakhāḥ kandhare śvetiyānvitāḥ||
adhomukhāḥ sthūlavālāḥ krudhā (sic!) *tvaritavikramāḥ|*
nṛmāṃsabhakṣaṇaratāḥ hariṇādivadhe ratāḥ||
niśāyām eva nidrānti māṃsabhakṣaṇatoṣitāḥ|
kiṃcitphenamukhāś caite mūḍhātmānaś ca kīrtitāḥ|| (*Mṛgapakṣiśāstra* 148–154)

> Hyenas have an outcaste birth. They are usually regarded as just as heroic and powerful as the tigers. Neither hyenas, nor tigers have manes. They copulate as often as it was stated that tigers do. They are strong, foolish and especially furious. Their dark and red bodies lack of any protrusion and stripes. Some of them are covered by dark spots. They run as quickly as arrows fly. Their fur is extended and harsh. Both their feet and their claws are short. Their necks are whitish. Their faces turn downwards. Their tails are gross. They are angry and run fast. They find pleasure in consuming human flesh and in killing deer. They sleep at night and like to eat meat. They dribble a bit and are known as stupid beings.

The listed characteristics, especially the mention of the dark spots, strongly indicate that Haṃsadeva may have been referring to the spotted hyena when he wrote these lines. The mention of the lack of a mane strongly suggests that this *tarakṣu* is not identical with the striped hyena, which possesses a long mane (Glickmann 1995: 510). Although it is tempting to use this source as key proof, I think that our problem is still unsolved, since it cannot be decided whether the author was directly familiar with the spotted hyena or produced his account with the influence of several contemporary travellers. As a matter of fact, it is not unimaginable that Haṃsadeva had never encountered the timid striped hyena and needed to work from foreign reports depicting the African spotted hyena.

TIGER, CHEETAH, AND BEAR

After the inquiry into the usage of the word *tarakṣu* with regard to the striped and spotted hyenas, as the third step of this analysis, three animals that are somehow associated with the term *tarakṣu* but definitely are not hyenas, are examined: tiger, cheetah and bear.

The relationship between the tiger and the hyena seems to be twofold. On the one hand, the hyena is sometimes regarded as a kind of tiger. This is less surprising, because the common Sanskrit word for tiger, *vyāghra*, itself stands for a comprehensive category that include the leopard (Karttunen 2009: 440), cheetah[9] and some other minor predators. In this way, it can often be very difficult to decide to what kind of animal this term refers. With regard to this question, there are some epithets that determine several groups of the *vyāghra*, and thus provide some

[9] Because, among the large cats, cheetahs were employed in hunting, the so-called *vyāghrajā mṛgayā* introduced by the *Mānasollāsa* (4.15.19–24) may refer to hunting with a cheetah.

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

aid in their identification. The leopard is, for example, distinguished as *citravyāghra* (Agniveśa comm. ad *Carakasaṃhitā* 1.27.35–36 p. 156) and the crocodile is called *puṣkaravyāghra* (Monier-Williams 2012: 638), while the hyena is degraded as *kṣudravyāghra*, which literally means 'low tiger'. Although this term is not a widely used word for the hyena, some animals designated as *kṣudravyāghra* appear in the *Bṛhatparāśarahorāśāstra* (7th century, Pingree 1981: 86), an astronomical work, in which together with the *piśāca* they are portrayed as households pests (*Bṛhatparāśarahoraśāstra* 55.72). As this portrayal is characteristic of the striped hyena, it is suggested that it in this work *kṣudravyāghra* refers to the striped hyena.

A similar thought incidentally occurs in Sāyaṇa's commentary on the *Taittirīya-saṃhitā* (14th century, Karnāṭaka, Griffith 1920: ix), which describes the hyena as an ass-like tiger (*vyāghraviśeṣo gardabhākāraḥ*, Sāyaṇa comm. ad *Taittirīya-saṃhitā* 5.5.19. p. 2272). The idea that the *tarakṣu*, which might be identical to the striped hyena in this work, is in fact a weaker version of the noble tiger, may be rooted in their similar, striped fur.

On the other hand, there are many instances, in which the word *tarakṣu* serves as a synonym for tiger. The following verse about a tiger-like *tarakṣu* is quoted in the *Sāhityadarpaṇa* (14th century, Oḍiśā, Kane 1923: cxxii) and the *Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra*:

> *lāṅgūlenābhihatya kṣititalam asakṛd dārayann agrapadbhyām|*
> *ātmany evāvalīya drutam atha gaganaṃ protpatan vikrameṇa||*
> *sphūrjaddhuṃkāraghoṣaḥ pratidiśam akhilān drāvayann eṣa jantūn|*
> *kopāviṣṭaḥ praviṣṭaḥ prativanam aruṇocchūnacakṣus tarakṣuḥ||*
> (*Sāhityadarpaṇa* p. 689, *Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra* p. 207)
>
> The wrathful, red-eyed hyena entered the forest. It was repeatedly beating the ground with its tail, and it was scratching with its forefeet. After that it crooked its [body] unexpectedly, and sprang up towards the sky forcibly. Its roar was rumbling, while it caused all of the creatures to run all around.

The reference to the thundering roar of this *tarakṣu* clarifies that it is neither the spotted nor the striped hyena described here, since they, contrary to the lion, the tiger and the leopard, are unable to roar. In this way, it seems reasonable to agree with Maheśvarabhaṭṭa, a commentator of the *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, who glossed the word *tarakṣu* as *vyāghra* here (Maheśvarabhaṭṭa comm. ad *Sāhityadarpaṇa* p. 689).

This identification is, moreover, found in the *Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa* (4th BC – 5th ?, 6th ?, 10th ? century CE, Rocher 1986: 157). It tells the gruesome story of how Paraśurāma killed a dreadful predator, which was referred to as *tarakṣu*, *vyāghra* or *śārdūla* (*Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa* 2.25.48–59).

Both of these sources exemplify well those characteristics that were typically attributed to the *vyāghra*. It was usually regarded as an animal that endangers human life and, in Karttunen's (2009: 437) words, embodies a 'wild nature'. From this view, it is possible that the fierce nature can imply the contamination of the *tarakṣu* with the *vyāghra*. As the spotted hyena may represent a more serious source of danger than the striped hyena, its association with the *vyāghra* can affirm the supposition of the existence of a predatory hyena. Again, their ferocity may serve as basis for their connection in the *Mṛgapakṣiśāstra*, which not only mentions the spotted hyena but also calls it the little brother of the tiger (*Mṛgapakṣiśāstra* 147: *vyāghrāṇām anujāḥ matāḥ*).

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

The connection between the cheetah and the hyena is also revealed in the *Mṛgapakṣiśāstra*. According to the text, the word *tarakṣu* means not only a species, but also a genus-like category, to which the *tarakṣu* and the *mṛgādana* both belong. Although the latter word, perhaps on the basis of the *Amarakoṣa* (2.5. p. 109) (before 8th century, Keith 1920: 413), is usually translated as hyena (Monier-Williams 2012: 829), the *Mṛgapakṣiśāstra* indicates through allusions to the animal's many spots, its high speed and its tameable nature that the *mṛgādana* is actually identical with the cheetah here:

mṛgādanāś ca tattulyāḥ kiṃcidaunnatyavarjitāḥ|
kecit tadaunnatyabhājaḥ jāyante pītavarṇakāḥ||
kṛṣnaraktaśarīrāś ca te krūrahṛdayā matāḥ|
dīrgapucchā dīrghanakhā bahubindubhir āvṛtāḥ||
raktarekhāyutā kecit pītarekhāyutāḥ pare|
prāyaś cordhvamukhā vegagatayo 'nalpavikramāḥ||
nṛmāṃsabhakṣaṇaratāḥ nṛmārgānveṣiṇo bhṛśam|
jvalanvegā mūḍhacittā naragandhāsahiṣṇavaḥ||
gonyaṃkumahiṣādīnāṃ māṃsabhakṣaṇajīvinaḥ|
śmaśruvṛddhiyutāḥ kecit bṛhannāsānanāḥ pare||
kuñjapādapamūleṣu līnāḥ sattvavināśinaḥ|
kṣutpipāsārditā madhyaṃdine te 'nalpavikramāḥ||
dīrghaśvāsāḥ svalpanidrāḥ mūḍhakāryaikatatparāḥ|
eteṣāṃ tu vayaḥ kālaḥ caturdaśasamo matāḥ||
vyāghravan na sukhagrāhāś caite tāḍanayogyakāḥ|
bhartsanād vāgurāpāśayogair grāhyā matā bhṛśam|| (*Mṛgapakṣiśāstra* 155–162)

> The cheetahs are similar to [the hyenas]. Some of them are a bit smaller, while others have the same height as their [relatives]. They are yellow. Their bodies are black and red. It is thought that they have cruel hearts. Both their tails and their claws are long. They are covered by many spots and have red or yellow stripes. Their faces are usually long. They move quickly and are regarded as valorous beings. They have a taste for human flesh and are able to seek for paths of people. They can run as quickly as [fire] blazes. They are ill-minded and cannot tolerate the smell of humans. They live on eating cows, antelopes, buffaloes, etc. Some of them wear a big moustache, while others have a huge nose and mouth. When they hunt, they hide themselves at the roots of trees in arbours. At midday, when they suffer from hunger and thirst, they can be very bold. They breathe heavily and sleep little. They are devoted only to foolish activities. Their lifespan is fourteen years. Just like the tigers, it is not easy to control them. They can be tamed by beatings. [If someone wants to break them] it is recommended to threaten them with nets and chains.

The fact that the word *tarakṣu* sometimes means cheetah can serve as another explanation for some of the above-cited sources that refer to the *tarakṣu* as a predator.

Finally, the connection between the hyena and the sloth bear should be briefly considered. This connection differs from the previous ones, because, unlike the tiger and the cheetah, the bear was not explicitly grouped under the term *tarakṣu*. Nevertheless, somewhat of a relationship is revealed in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (4th–5th century, Pereira and Tiso 1987: 451):

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

> *gavayaśṛgālakharatarakṣāṇāṃ punaḥ kālo nāstīti yenānyatra kāle goṣūpapattavyaṃ sa gavayeṣūpapadyate yena śvasu sa śṛgāleṣu yenāśveṣu sa gardabheṣu yena ṛkṣeṣu sa tarakṣeṣūpapadyate iti*| (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 3.14–15, p. 126)
>
> There is not a time fixed for [copulation] among gayals, jackals, asses and hyenas. If cows copulate at an improper time, a gayal will be born. If the dogs do this, a jackal will be born. If horses do this, an ass will be born, and [finally] if bears do this, a hyena will be born.

Vasubandhu mentions four animal pairs, namely the cow and the gayal, the dog and the jackal, the horse and the ass, and the bear and the hyena. As the first three pairs consist of similar species, it is tempting to recognise a similar connection between the bear and the hyena. Although the formerly cited *Parāśarasmṛti* orders them into the same category, they do not have any apparent shared hallmarks (*Parāśarasmṛti* 6.11). However, the word *ṛkṣa*, meaning bear, and *tarakṣu* are quite often mentioned one after the other, possibly for the sake of the alliteration in the *dvaṃdva*-compounds and the lists enumerating various animals (*Brahma-purāṇa* 220.193, *Mahābhārata* 1.219.1, *Matsya-purāṇa* 118.54, 135.68, *Rāmāyaṇa* 2.88.7, 3.44.28). In this way, it could happen that Vasubandhu, who may have been familiar with these lists, automatically adopted the often-heard *ṛkṣa-tarakṣu* couple. A similar incident was formerly perceived by Jamison (1998: 249–256) in connection with the appearance of the rhinoceros among the five-toed animals.

CONCLUSION

From examining various references to the hyena in Sanskrit works, it seems that the word *tarakṣu*, the most common term for the hyena, was also used to denote different animals. On the one hand, when the word refers to a nocturnal scavenger, I believe that there is no reason to doubt its common association with the Indian striped hyena. On the other hand, the appearance of the *tarakṣu* among the predators opens the door for more interpretations.

First of all, it can be understood as a predatory hyena, which corresponds well to Frembgen's supposition about the late existence of the spotted hyena in South Asia. Although the allusions to the spots and the laugh-like sound can support the supposition, this thought remains purely hypothetical without any supporting archeozoological researches.

In other cases, *tarakṣu* apparently serves as synonym for tiger and more accurately for *vyāghra*. This identification can explain references that describe the *tarakṣu* as a gruesome, buffalo-killing predator, though it also should not be forgotten that the *tarakṣu* often appears together with the lion and the tiger, together forming the triad of the most venerable predators.

Finally, it is remarkable as well that the word *tarakṣu* can also mean cheetah on the basis of the *Mṛgapakṣiśāstra*, which at once gives a third possible explanation for why the scavenging *tarakṣu* sometimes appears among the predators.

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Roland Ferenczi, Ronan Moreau, Asko Parpola, Arjuna S R and Martin Straube for recommending and sharing useful sources about hyenas. I am also grateful to Réka Kralovics-Németh and László Zala for polishing my English.

REFERENCES

Primary sources

Abhidharmakośabhāṣya = Pradhan, P. (ed.) 1975. *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu.* Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute.

Agniveśa comm. ad *Carakasaṃhitā* = Āchārya, Jādavaji Trikamji (ed.) 1941. *The Carakasaṃhitā by Agniveśa.* Bombay: Satyabhāmābāi Pāndurang.

Amarakośa = Abhimanyu, Manna Lal (ed.) 1937. *The Amara-kosha of Shri Amara Sinha.* Benares: Master Khelarilal & Sons.

Brahma-purāṇa = Schreiner, Peter and Renate Söhnen (eds.) *Brahmapurāṇa.* (http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/3_purana/brahmap/brahmppu.htm [accessed on: 28.11.2018]).

Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa = 1912. Bombay: Venkatesvara Steam Press (http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/corpustei/transformations/html/sa_brahmANDapurANa.htm [accessed on: 19.10.2022]).

Bṛhatparāśarahorāśāstra = Santhanam, R. (ed.) 1995. *Brihat Parasara Hora Sastra of Maharshi Parasara. Vol II.* New Delhi: Ranjan Publications.

Harṣacarita = Parab, Kâśinâth Pâṇḍurang (ed.) 1912. *The Harshacharita of Bâṇabhaṭṭa with the Commentary (Saṅketa) of Śankara.* Bombay: Nirṇaya Sâgar Press.

Jaiminīya-brāhmaṇa = Vira, Raghu and Lokesh Chandra (eds.) 1954. *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa of the Sāmaveda.* Delhi–Varanasi–Patna–Madras: Motilal Banarsidass.

Jayatīrtha comm. ad *Anuvyākhyāna* = http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/corpustei/transformations/html/sa_jayatIrtha-nyAyasudhA.htm (accessed on: 30.10.2022).

Kapiṣṭhala-saṃhitā = Vira, Raghu (ed.) 1932. *Kapiṣṭhala-Kaṭha-Saṃhitā. A Text of the Black Yajurveda.* Lahore: Mehar Chand Lachhman Das.

Kāṭhaka-saṃhitā 1–18 = von Schroeder, Leopold (ed.) 1900. *Kâṭhakam. Die Saṃhitâ der Kaṭha-çâkhâ. Erstes Buch.* Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus.

Kāṭhaka-saṃhitā 19–30 = von Schroeder, Leopold (ed.) 1909. *Kâṭhakam. Die Saṃhitâ der Kaṭha-çâkhâ. Zweites Buch.* Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus.

Kāṭhaka-saṃhitā 31–40 = von Schroeder, Leopold (ed.) 1910. *Kâṭhakam. Die Saṃhitâ der Kaṭha-çâkhâ. Drittes Buch.* Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus.

Mahābhārata = Sukthankar, Vishnu S. *et al.* (eds.) 1927–1966. *The Mahābhārata.* Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

Maheśvarabhaṭṭa comm. ad *Sāhityadarpaṇa* = Kar, Karuṇākar (ed.) 1938. *Sāhitya Darpana Of Kaviraja Viśvanātha Mahāpātra With Two Old Commentaries.* Lahore: Motilal Banarsidass.

Maitrāyaṇī-saṃhitā = Sātavalekar, Vasanta Śrīpāda (ed.) 1941. *Yajurvedīya Maitrāyaṇī-saṃhitā.* Mumbai: Government Press.

Mānasollāsa = Shrigondekar, G. K. (ed.) 1939. *Mānasollāsa of King Someśvara.* Baroda: Oriental Institute.

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

Matsya–purāṇa = 1954. Calcutta, Caukhamba Vidyabhavan http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/3_purana/mtp176pu.htm (accessed on: 19.10.2022.).

Mṛgapakṣiśāstra = Sadhale, Nalini & Y. L. Nene (eds.) 2008. *Mrigapakshishastra. The Science of Animals and Birds by Hamsadeva (c. 13th century AD).* Secunderabad: Asian Agri-History Foundation.

Pañcaviṃśa-brāhmaṇa = 2020. http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/corpustei/transformations/html/sa_paJcaviMzabrAhmaNa.htm (accessed on: 30.10.2022).

Parāśarasmṛti = Tarkālaṅkāra, Chandrakānta (ed.) 1889. *Parāśara-smṛti. Parāśara Mādhava. Volumes II and III.* Calcutta: The Asiatic Society.

Rāmāyaṇa = Bhatt, G. H. *et al.* (eds.) 1960–1975. *The Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa.* Baroda: Oriental Institute.

Sāhityadarpaṇa = Kar, Karuṇākar (ed.) 1938. *Sāhitya Darpana Of Kaviraja Viśvanātha Mahāpātra With Two Old Commentaries.* Lahore: Motilal Banarsidass.

Sāyaṇa comm. ad *Maitrāyaṇī-saṃhitā* = Āpaṭe, Mahādeva Cimaṇājī (ed.) 1949. *Śrīmatsāyaṇācāryaviracitab hāṣyasametā Kṛṣṇayajurvedīyataittirīyasaṃhitā.* Poona: Ānandāśramamudraṇālaya.

Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra = Kāvyatīrth, Nārāyaṇ Rām Āchārya (ed.) 1952. *Subhāṣita-ratna-bhāṇḍāgāra or Gems of Sanskrit Poetry being a Collection of witty, Epigrammatic, Instructive and Descriptive Verses.* Bombay: Nirnaya Sagar Press.

Suvarṇaprabhāsasūtra = Bagchi, S. (ed.) 1967. *Suvarṇaprabhāsasūtra.* Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute.

Taittirīya-saṃhitā = Sātavalekar, Vasanta Śrīpāda (ed.) 1957. *Kṛṣna-Yajurvedīya-Taittirīya-saṃhitā.* Mumbai: Government Press.

Vācaspatimiśra comm. ad *Nyāyasūtra* = Tailanga, Gangadhara Sastri (ed.) 1898. *The Nyayavarttikatatparyatika of Vâchaspati Miśra.* Benares: E. J. Lazarus.

Secondary sources

Acharya, Diwakar 2006. *Vācaspatimiśra's Tattvasamīkṣā. The Earliest Commentary on Maṇḍamiśra's Brahmasiddhi.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Apte, Vaman Shivram 1890. *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary.* Poona: Shiralkar & Co.

Basham, Arthul Llewellyn 1986. *The Wonder That Was India.* Calcutta–Allahabad–Bombay–Delhi: Rupa Co.

Böhtlingk, Otto & Rudolph Roth 1861. *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch. Dritter Theil.* St. Petersburg: Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Burton, Richard & Forster Fitzgerald Arbuthnot (transl.) 1963. *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana.* New York: W. G. Archer.

Cresswell, Richard (transl.) 1883. *Aristotle's The History of Animals.* London: George Bell & Sons.

Frembgen, Jürgen W. 1998. 'The Magicality of the Hyena: Beliefs and Practices in West and South Asia.' *Asian Folklore Studies* 57/2: 331–344.

Funk, Holger 2012. 'How the Ancient Krokottas evolved into the Modern Spotted Hyena Crocuta crocuta.' *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 101/2: 145–166.

Glickman, Stephen E. 1995. 'The Spotted Hyena From Aristotle to the Lion King: Reputation is Everything.' *Social Research: An Internation Quarterly* 62/3: 501–537.

Griffith, Ralph T. H. 1920. *The Hymns of the Rigveda. Vol. I.* Benares: Lazarus and Co.

Gummer, Natalie 2015: 'Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra.' In: Jonathan Silk, Oskar von Hinüber and Vincent Eltschinger (eds.) *Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism. Volume One: Literature and Languages.* Leiden: Brill, 249–260.

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC

Hemingway, Ernest 1921. *Green Hills of Africa.* London: Jonathan Cape.
Heptner, V. G. & A. A. Sludskii 1992. *Mammals of the Soviet Union. Volume II, Part 2.* Washington: Smithsonian Institution Libraries and The National Science Foundation.
Jamison, Stephanie W. 1991. *The Ravenous Hyena and the Wounded Sun. Myth and Ritual in Ancient India.* Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press.
Jamison, Stephanie W. 1998. 'Rhinoceros Toes, Manu V.17-18, and the Development of the Dharma System.' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118/2: 249–256.
Kane, Pandurang Vaman 1923. *The Sāhityadarpaṇa of Viśvanātha. (Parichchedas I–X) with Notes on Parichchhedas I, II, X and History of Alaṅkāra Literature*. Bombay: Pandurang Vaman Kane.
Karttunen, Klaus 2009. 'siṃhair iti vyāghraiḥ.' In: Nalini Balbir and Georges-Jean Pinault (eds.) *Penser, dire représenter l'animal dans le monde indien.* Paris: Honoré Champion, 431–446.
Keith, A. Berriedale 1920. *A History of Sanskrit Literature.* London: Geoffrey Cumberlege.
Leslie, David E. 2016. 'A Striped Hyena Scavenging Event: Implications for Oldowan Hominin Behavior.' *Field Notes: A Journal of Collegiate Anthropology* 8: 122–138.
Monier-Williams, Monier 2012: *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary.* Delhi: Nataraj Books.
Milton, John 1890. *Samson Agonistes.* London: Rivingtons.
Olivelle, Patrick 2010. 'Dharmaśāstra: a textual history.' In: Timothy Lubin, Donald R. Davis Jr and Jayanth K. Krishnan (eds.) *Hinduism and Law. An Introduction.* Leiden: Cambridge University Press, 28–57.
Pereira, José & Francis Tiso 1987. 'The Life of Vasubandhu According to Recent Research.' *East and West* 37/4: 451–454.
Pingree, David 1981. *Jyotiḥśāstra. Astral and Mathematical Literature.* Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
Rocher, Ludo 1986. *The Purāṇas*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassoitz.
Sadhale, Nalini & Y. L. Nene (eds.) 2008. *Mrigapakshishastra. The Science of Animals and Birds by Hamsadeva (c. 13th century AD).* Secunderabad: Asian Agri-History Foundation.
Sharma, B. N. K. 1981. *The History of the Dvaita School of Vedānta and its Literature.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
van der Geer, Alexandra 2008. *Animals in Stone. Indian Mammals Sculptured Through Time.* Boston and Leiden: Brill.
Witzel, Michael 2001. 'Autochthonous Aryans? The Evidence from Old Indian and Iranian Texts.' *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 7/3: 1–93.

Open Access. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, a link to the CC License is provided, and changes – if any – are indicated. (SID_1)

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 03/06/24 01:39 PM UTC